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Author(s): J. H. Horner and Grace Butterfield

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ENTERPRISE: ITS BACKGROUND AND BEGINNINGS

By J. H. HORNER and GRACE BUTTERFIELD

Although it is more or less a man-made accident that Enterprise has come to be the largest town in and the county seat of Wallowa county, this outcome from such tardy beginnings (as a town proper Enterprise came into being some years after the county's other towns) is in many ways not surprising, for the wide flat on which it is built has long been a spot which drew to it life, animal as well as human.

Enterprise has been built on what was once a sprawling, grass and bush covered flat just at the southern edge of the bare "hill" country and the northern edge of the Wallowa river and valley. The soil of this flat is full of alkali, there are spots where the ground is white with it and therefore bare of vegetation. The Indians called this flat *Tom-mah-talk-ke-sin-mah*—white fluffy, or alkali soil. It was to these bare, alkaline spots that the salt craving animals of the country used to come to lick this white, salty tasting earth. Wild elk and deer came here, the Indians' numerous herds of horses and later, cattle. Still later the cattle belonging to the white stockmen came to these licks and the place grew to be a favorite gathering, cutting and branding place for the cattlemen. The main street of Enterprise has been the scene of many a spontaneous rodeo!

The flat was also a favorite camping ground for the Nez Perces Indians. Each spring certain bands of them set up a village of tepees along Tom-mah-talk-ke-sin-mah Creek (now Trout Creek) which runs along the western edge of the flat, and built their wallowa, or tripodedly anchored willow woven fish traps at the creek's mouth, to catch their share of the great, spring run of salmon, trout.

In 1872 William Bennett came in from the Grande Ronde country and squatted, with his family, near a spring on the northwest corner of the flat. (He was one of the first white settlers to come to the Wallowa valley.) He built a log cabin there and lived in it for some years, the only white man to be settled in that vicinity, and thus it was that the alkali flat

began to be called Bennett flat by the white people who passed that way.¹

It was in this log cabin that Wallowa valley's first presidential election was held in 1872². There were present six democrats and two republicans. W. W. White, a Democrat, was, at this time, elected the first Justice of the peace of Wallowa valley.³

In 1880⁴ R. F. Stubblefield took up a homestead (160 acres) on part of the Bennett flat land, and built a house there. It was the first house of lumber to be built on the land where Enterprise now stands. The lumber was hauled by oxen to the flat from the nearby Hurricane creek lumber mill and cost \$8 per 1000.⁵ He and his family lived here for a good many years, growing grain on one of the flat's more fertile corners and cutting hay from the long, wild grass which grew on the land.

In 1885⁶ another man, John Zurcher, took up a homestead on the flat on land which joined Stubblefield's on the east, and, about the first of August in 1885,⁷ the two men, Stubblefield and Zurcher, hired George Vail, another early homesteader who was also a surveyor, to survey and make a plat of the forty acres of each of their homesteads which met near the center of the flat. It seemed to them to be a good place for a town. In was seven miles from the then business center of Wallowa valley, Joseph, and ten miles from the nearest town in the other direction, Lostine.

When Vail, in his surveying, came to a certain spot, the exact center of the two 40's, he said, "Well, here's *your* block, boys," and the two men called this the public square and each donated to the future town his share of it. They called their town Franklin, since Stubblefield's middle name was Frank,

¹Remembered by early settlers here at the time.

²Remembered by J. McAlister, present on chat occasion.

³*Ibid.*

⁴R. F. Stubblefield's statement.

⁵The settler, who built this house, John Hayes, has given this information.

⁶C. H. Zurcher's statement.

⁷R. F. Stubblefield's statement.

and the plat of the town Franklin, Union County, was filed January 18, 1886, and recorded February 25, 1886.⁸

In 1886⁹ A. M. Wagner took up a homestead and built a house on land that joined Zurcher's platted 40 acres on the south. Part of this homestead later became Wagner's addition, an important one, to the town of Enterprise. It was the third of the three homesteads which later became Enterprise.

But, although the land was ready and platted in 1885, Stubblefield and Zurcher had to wait until 1887 for a real break for their hopes. In the meantime the name Franklin had not "taken" and somehow the place had begun to be called Wallowa City. So general had this become that the town had been replatted and re-named Wallowa City and the new plat filed on June 21, 1887, at Joseph,¹⁰ the then county seat of the newly [Feb. 1887¹¹] formed Wallowa county. Early in 1887 the Island City Mercantile and Milling Company sent four of its largest stockholders from the Grande Ronde to the Wallowa valley to pick a site at which to begin business. The company was ready to start a bank, a general store and a grist mill in the valley.

It first seemed to these men that Lostine, the geographical center of the valley, was the place for them. The company was ready to set up its buildings but it felt that the owner of the town in which it settled should be willing to donate the lots for the buildings. Lostine was not willing. They then passing by the neatly platted but sparsely settled little flat of Wallowa City, went to Joseph, the, as we have said, business center of the valley—it already had a store, a blacksmith shop, a hotel, etc.—and tried to do business there on the same terms. The business men of Joseph also objected to giving any land to them. "Very well," they said, "That's all right with us. We'll just go down here to Wallowa City and start a town of our own."

And they did. Stubblefield gladly gave them a block of land diagonally across from the Public Square. The I. C. M.

⁸County Clerk's Records, Wallowa County.

⁹A. M. Wagner's statements.

¹⁰County Clerk's Records.

¹¹"*Laws of Oregon*," 1887, p. 142.

¹²One of the stockholders present, J. M. Church.

and M. Co. was anxious to get started at once, so that while plans were going forward for their first building on this block, they put up a temporary tent store near their permanent location.

It was in this tent sometime in September, 1887,¹³ that a group of men was gathered, trying to decide on a permanent name for the town. Some of them thought the present name, Wallowa City, was pretty and appropriate. That, however, was objected to as a permanent name because of the town in the lower valley already called Wallowa. There had already been some confusion between the two places. Some thought Franklin or Fairfield were good, in honor of R. F. Stubblefield. John Zurcher, who had come from Cadiz, Ohio, suggested that name. They were arguing about it when R. M. Steel, one of the I. C. M. and M. Co.s stockholders, said, "It ought to be an enterprising little town anyway." Stubblefield then suggested Enterprise as a name and the men lined up along the store's rough board counter and voted on the name suggested. Enterprise won by a majority of votes. On June 14, 1888, it was filed and recorded as the "Town of Enterprise."¹⁴ The City of Enterprise was incorporated on February 21, 1889, by the Oregon Legislature.¹⁵ It was already, by the general election of 1888, the county seat of Wallowa county.¹⁶

From here on, as with all towns, after they are once begun, the story of Enterprise loses much of its individuality, and the rest is a series of "firsts" as happen in any community.

In October of November, 1887,¹⁷ the post office at Alder (a little gathering of buildings on the mountain slope across the valley from Enterprise) was moved, bag and baggage, by oxen, to Enterprise. The Alder post-mistress, Catherine Aiken, became the first post mistress of Enterprise.

There was a newspaper in Enterprise as early as 1887. The

¹³By man present, A. M. Wagner.

¹⁴County Clerk's Records.

¹⁵"*Laws of Oregon*," 1889, p. 372.

¹⁶County Records.

¹⁷Lewis A. McArthur, *Oregon Geographic Names* (1928) and memory of early settlers, C. H. Zurcher.

building put up for it was one of the first buildings in the town. The paper was called the *Wallowa County Enterprise*.¹⁸

The year 1888 was an important one for Enterprise for early in that year the town was organized and the first municipal officers elected. The exact date and the proceedings of this meeting have been lost, although the list of the first officers is known.¹⁹

The Enterprise school district, District No. 21, was organized in the spring of 1888.²⁰ The date and proceedings of this meeting have also been lost, but we do know that the district bought the building, hitherto used by a man named Newell as a private school, that year. There had been a school of some sort in Enterprise off and on since 1885 when Susie Zurcher, then a girl of sixteen, taught a dozen pupils in one of the buildings on the Stubblefield place.²¹ Charles Newell, a one-armed southerner, had had three men build a small school house for him, which he had used the winter of '87 and '88. The attic, or half second story of this was used for Masonic Lodge meetings. The building still stands on the main street of Enterprise. Even after the school district was formed and a public school available, L. O. Hoffman, a teacher, established an "Academy" in the town for pupils at \$2.00 a month. He had about twenty-five pupils.

The first church to be incorporated in Enterprise was the Methodist Episcopal in 1888,²² and in that year a building was put up for it on land donated by John Zurcher for church and parsonage. The church had been organized and services held in one of the Stubblefield buildings several years previously. After this and before the erection of the church, services and Sunday school had been held at the Zurcher home.

The first Enterprise bank, the first National bank in the county, was organized by the men of the Island City Mercantile and Milling Co. in 1888.²³ Business was beginning in

¹⁸A. H. Phelps, Editor.

¹⁹*History of Union and Wallowa Counties.*"

²⁰Memory of early settlers.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*History of Union and Wallowa Counties.*

²³W. R. Holmes, the first cashier, is authority for this statement.

the town. More additions were made to the town, adjoining land was bought and lots offered for sale.

On the fourth of July, 1888, the Grand Army of the Republic had a parade with a band and unfurled the United States flag, the town's first public unfurling on the public square, at the end of the longest pole the boys could find out in the woods. All hands had turned out the day before to help set it up.²⁴

Real civilization began to come. The first telephone in the town was put in on November 25, 1895.²⁵ A membership library was organized in 1900.²⁶ In 1904, beginning to look backward as well as forward, the Pioneer Association of Wallowa County was organized at Enterprise.²⁷

And on November 14, 1908, the railroad came through. People, many of whom had never been out of the county, flocked to see this first engine. They soon discovered, contrary to the joking threats of the engineer, that the train was not going to turn around suddenly and run over them. The tentative beginnings, the early days of the town were gone. Gone, as they always are for towns situated on the outskirts of civilization, quietly, with the words, "Then the railroad came through."

²⁴Memory of J. H. Horner.

²⁵*Silver Lake Herald*, June 7, 1895.

²⁶J. S. Hodgin was its first chairman.

²⁷*Wallowa Chieftan*, October 13, 1904.

²⁸*Ibid*, November 19, 1908.